

Right-wing hate campaign in Germany against Nobel Prize winner Peter Handke

By Bernd Reinhardt and Peter Schwarz
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The Nobel Prize in Literature 2019 is due to be awarded to the Austrian writer Peter Handke (born 1942) on December 10.

Handke's best-known work includes his play *Offending the Audience* (1966), *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (the novel published in 1970 and screenplay for the 1972 film directed by Wim Wenders), the autobiographical novella *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* based on the life of his mother (1972), the novel (1976) and film (1978) *The Left-Handed Woman*, the screenplay for *Wings of Desire* with Wenders (1987), *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other* (one-act play, 1992) and other works.

Following the announcement of the award, Handke, an author of renown, has been the subject of a massive hate campaign.

The vicious attacks are not directed at Handke's award-winning literary work. He ranks, over the course of five decades, as one of the leading authors and translators in the German language. The attacks are aimed at his political views. A significant section of Germany's cultural and literary elite has never forgiven Handke for his vehement opposition to the smashing up of Yugoslavia and the military intervention carried out by NATO in the 1990s.

Handke had the courage to brand the Western powers for what they were—arsonists in the Yugoslav war—and condemn the illegal NATO bombing of Serbia. For his stance he was denounced as a denier of genocide, a defender of war crimes and an anti-Semite. All of these allegations are made in an October 25 article published by the literary figure Alida Bremer in the German online cultural magazine *Perlentaucher*. Bremer, a holder of the Order of the Republic of Croatia, however, is far from an unbiased witness.

Bremer's vicious tirade is just one of many. The Bosnian-German author Sasa Stanisic has also taken part in the campaign against Handke. During his speech following the awarding of the German book prize for 2019, Stanisic told the media present that Handke did not deserve the prize because he used his literature to spread lies.

The fusillades from Handke's most aggressive opponents resemble the rantings of criminals intent on covering up their own tracks.

The NATO war against Yugoslavia twenty years ago witnessed the shift of an entire layer of German intellectuals and well-to-do petty bourgeoisie former pacifists into the camp of German militarism. The embodiment of this layer was former street fighter Joschka Fischer.

In his role as the first-ever Green Party German foreign minister, Fischer cynically used the sentence "Auschwitz can never happen again" to justify the bombing of Belgrade, which was reduced to ruins by Hitler's Wehrmacht in World War II. The Greens paved the way for the first international military mission by the German army in the postwar period. Now such missions are commonplace—and extend from Afghanistan to Mali in Africa.

Handke defiantly and angrily opposed this development. In his travelogues "Justice for Serbia" and "Supplement" he did not mince words. He aptly described NATO as a criminal organisation, denounced the hypocrisy of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green coalition government, and made unmistakably clear that he deeply despised the majority of journalists as little more than paid hirelings of the major powers.

Handke's writings on Yugoslavia are clearly directed against a war based on falsehood and hysteria. His aim was not to justify Serb nationalism and its crimes but rather to desperately defend what once was the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia. Even his descriptions of the countryside are permeated poetically by such considerations: landscapes and mountains are free of any ethnic-national boundaries. Nature itself embodies Yugoslavia and the people who lived there together in peace.

"Early on in his work, Handke clearly spoke out for peace and not for war and he represents a fundamentally anti-nationalist viewpoint," was the comment by Nobel Prize Committee member Henrik Petersen to Spiegel Online, defending the decision to award the prize to Handke.

Two weeks ago in *Die Zeit*, Handke angrily asked: "How

could Germany recognise Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, when more than a third of the population were either Orthodox or Muslim Serbs? That's how a fratricidal war came about."

The German government immediately recognised Slovenia and Croatia as independent states in 1991, thereby triggering bloody conflicts that claimed more than 100,000 lives and shattered Yugoslavia into seven hostile and economically unviable mini-states dominated by poverty, ethnic tensions and criminal elites. These statelets have remained playthings in the hands of the great powers.

"The old hostilities exploited by foreign powers in the First World War and then in the Second World War, broke out once again following recognition," Handke added, and asked: "Had one forgotten that this state was founded in opposition to Hitler and his Third Reich?"

These issues are also bound up with Handke's relationship with former Serbian President Slobodan Milošević who died in prison in 2006, following his trial by the Hague War Crimes Tribunal. Handke spoke briefly at Milošević's grave, a contribution which was subsequently interpreted as support for war crimes and massacres. In reality, Handke merely expressed his grief and helplessness in the face of the Yugoslav disaster.

Milošević—like the Croat leader Franjo Tuđman and the Slovenian Milan Kučan—was a longtime official in the regime of Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito. Confronted with growing opposition from the working class, Milošević increasingly relied on nationalism and the restoration of capitalism to preserve his power and privileges.

After his death the WSWS wrote: "While there is no doubt that Milošević bore his share of responsibility for the bloodshed that erupted in the Balkans in the 1990s, in the end the political source of his guilt lay principally in his adaptation—like other Yugoslav ex-Stalinist bureaucrats turned nationalists—to the capitalist market policies of imperialism in the region and his use of nationalism to divert the opposition of working people to the economic devastation wrought by these policies."

Handke was unwilling to uncritically accept the transformation of Milošević from an ally of the West and a man praised for his free-market reforms into a villain and a "new Hitler." He understood that the demonisation of Milošević was profoundly reactionary. In a similar manner, Iraq's President Saddam Hussein and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi were both transformed virtually overnight from Western partners into reincarnations of Hitler in order to justify the wars that ended in the complete subjugation and destruction of their societies.

Handke approaches these questions as a writer, not as a politician or historian. He has no solution. "Handke's work

is characterised by an approach which criticises ideologies and raises ethical questions, he does not put forward a political program," Petersen writes. The accusation that Handke justified massacres is an infamous lie. He has expressly distanced himself years ago from the massacre in Srebrenica, which he has been accused of trivialising.

The political campaign against Peter Handke takes place against the background of massive military rearmament and ideological and practical preparations by Germany for new wars. Those who stand in the way of these preparations face a relentless media campaign, irrespective of their merits.

A similar campaign took place seven years ago when Günter Grass was also awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. After writing a poem warning of Israeli preparations for war against Iran and the danger of a nuclear world war, Grass was viciously denounced as an anti-Semite and closet Nazi.

"All those who oppose war in the Middle East and the growing threat of a new world war must defend Günter Grass and oppose the warmongers in Berlin, Washington and Tel Aviv as well as their lackeys in the media." wrote the WSWS at that time. The same message applies to the case of Peter Handke.

The authors also recommend:

The Austrian Peter Handke, European public opinion, and the war in Yugoslavia

[11 August 1999]

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